

Language Arts Writing Lessons/Prompts

Introduction

Along with listening, reading, and speaking, writing is one of the four basic communication strands in any language arts curriculum. Unfortunately, writing often receives much less attention than other communication modes, especially reading. Frequent calls for improvement in student literacy are often directed exclusively at reading instruction or at reading test scores, to the exclusion of writing. In truth, however, reading and writing are reciprocal; improvements in student writing will lead to improved reading skills, and vice versa. Yet, in many Utah classrooms, a high percentage of language arts instructional time still focuses the student only on the improvement of reading, with writing often relegated to journal entries, content area reports, or assigned “creative writing.” And, in too many classrooms, formal writing instruction is either infrequent or nonexistent.

At least part of this neglect can be attributed to student class loads and the enormous responsibility teachers feel to “correct” student papers. A second factor is the complex nature of writing instruction, as well as the necessary demands of one-to-one conferencing and individualized instruction. Last, but certainly not least, is the level of confidence teachers possess in teaching writing effectively. There is no real shortcut in the teaching of writing. Writing teachers must be informed decision makers; they must know good writing from bad, and the specific traits/attributes affecting the quality of the writing. Teachers must possess the ability to coach, coax, and sometimes cajole the best writing out of their students. Like teachers of reading who like to read and see themselves as readers, teachers of writing must not neglect this skill in their own lives; they too must write and view themselves as writers.

The lesson plans and writing prompts that follow were produced to assist teachers in their roles as teachers of writing. Together, they should not be considered a writing program, complete or incomplete, but simply a tool to assist in the instruction and assessment of students in the most informal of settings, the classroom. You will find on the following pages a complete Six Traits analytical scoring guide; lesson plans and writing prompts for each grade level, kindergarten through sixth grade; sample student papers from each writing lesson; and an assessment and analysis of each paper based upon the Six Traits model, with teacher commentary.

Six Traits Writing Assessment Model

The Six Traits Writing Assessment Model included here is generic to all modes of writing. Developed by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, this assessment model is based on a five-point scale, with five being the highest and one the lowest. Descriptors accompany score points one, three and five only. Papers falling between descriptors one and three or descriptors three and five receive score points of two and four, respectively. Student papers are assessed on separate writing traits: ideas and content, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. Teachers

not familiar with the Six Traits model should read the descriptors carefully and practice assessing papers, or enroll in a Six Traits writing in-service, if possible. Student papers at the primary grade levels (K-2) are not assessed using this model. The sample papers for K-2 lessons shown here include the teacher commentary only.

Lesson Plans and Writing Prompts

At least one lesson plan and prompt are available for each grade level. For some grades, two or more are available. Each lesson and prompt has been field tested with several groups of students. Most of the writing prompts require students to produce a narrative or descriptive response. Future lessons will be correlated to content areas such as social studies, mathematics, and science, and require students to produce more expository responses. Although each step in the writing process is not explicitly specified in each lesson plan, the complete writing process is implied. Pre-writing activities and experiences are an integral part of each lesson. Time to adequately draft, rewrite, and edit are essential to producing a writer's best work. Embed these assessments as a natural part of your writing program. Do not announce them as tests or assessments. Take whatever time is needed to obtain the best results. Adapt. Modify. Change the lesson plans, if you choose, to make them your own and to make them work best for your students. Remember, you are attempting to find out what students **can** do, not just what they need to learn.

Sample Student Papers

Sample student papers are shown for each lesson and prompt. In most cases, a high-end paper and an average or low-end paper are represented. In other cases, student papers are not labeled as either. In point of fact, all student sample papers should be viewed as just that—samples—drawn from students who participated in the field tests. The high-end papers are not perfect, nor are they models of what students **should** produce. Use the sample papers to gain an understanding of what students can and do produce under the conditions specified in the lessons. Teach and re-teach. Get students to stretch their abilities. Work hard to produce better samples and models from your own students.

Teacher Commentaries

Following each student sample is a teacher commentary. In grades three through six, the commentary is accompanied by the Six Traits score received by the student on each of the traits. Of more interest is the annotation (or comment) by the teacher attached to each score point. Although the commentaries are by necessity short, they give some insight into what teachers might say to students in a writing conference. In grades K-2, no trait scores are assigned because the text generated at these grade levels tends to be limited. Only the teacher commentary is given. For prompts requiring an expository response, only three traits were scored—content and ideas, organization, and conventions.

A Word About the Lessons and Prompts

The lessons, writing prompts, student samples, and commentaries on the website www.usoe.org were written and developed by a team of teachers representing various

Utah districts. Members of the team field-tested all lessons and prompts with their own students, and made revisions and adjustments prior to publication. Utah teachers have permission to copy and use all lessons on this website with their own students. Ownership of the materials resides with the Utah State Office of Education.

The Six Traits of Writing Within the Writing Process of Instruction

Writing, Standard 8 of the Utah Elementary Language Arts Core Curriculum, is organized around the Writing Process. The writing process is defined as pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing/presenting. During the pre-writing stage, the writer thinks about his or her purpose for writing, gathers information, chooses a form for writing (letter, report, etc), makes a plan, and decides who will be the audience. The drafting stage of the Writing Process is the first attempt by the writer to get ideas down on paper. The writer creates a number of drafts within this stage. Revising is where the writer attempts to change the final draft in order to improve the writing. The writer may choose to add, cut, or change an idea during the revising stage. Editing is the next stage of the Writing Process. During the editing stage, the writer does a final edit and proofreading of their writing. Editing is a very careful word-by-word, line-by-line checking of the writing in order to correct any errors. During the publishing/presenting stage of the Writing Process, the writer might publish his or her writing by placing the writing in a notebook, hanging it on a classroom wall, or placing it in a class book. The writer may also present by simply reading their writing to a classroom buddy.

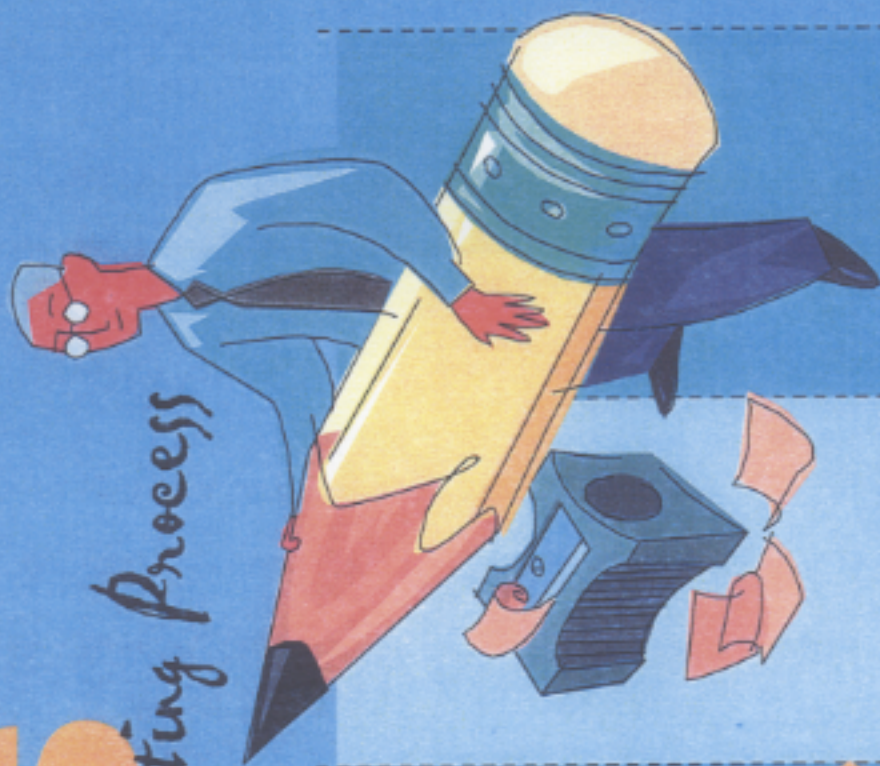
The Six Traits of writing are embedded within the Writing Process. The trait of generating ideas occurs within the pre-writing stage. The trait of organization is addressed during the pre-writing stage and the drafting stage of the Writing Process. The trait of voice is addressed during the drafting stage of writing. During the revising stage, the writer works to achieve sentence fluency and appropriate word choice. The editing stage is where close attention is paid to the conventions of writing.

As a writer becomes more experienced with the Six Traits of writing, he or she may choose to address the Six Traits within the Writing Process in a more individual way. The writer may choose to look at conventions in both the revising and editing stage of their writing. They may also choose to think about voice in the pre-writing stage, as well as the drafting stage.

Shown on the next page is a graphic that illustrates the general process of addressing the Six Traits within the Writing Process. Certainly the classroom teacher, as he/she delivers writing instruction and reviews students' writing, would want to be aware of the Writing Process and how the Six Traits are nested within this process.

6 TRAITS

Within the Writing Process



1. IDEAS

2. ORGANIZATION

3. VOICE

4. SENTENCE
FLUENCY

5. WORD
CHOICE

6. CONVENTIONS

Pre-writing

Drafting

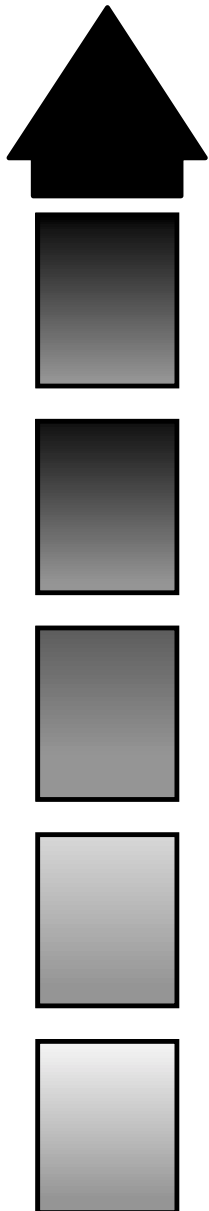
Revising

Editing

*Publishing/
Presenting*

6 + 1 Trait™ Writing

Assessment Scoring Guide



WOW!

Exceeds expectations

- IDEAS
- ORGANIZATION
- VOICE
- WORD CHOICE
- SENTENCE FLUENCY
- CONVENTIONS
- PRESENTATION

⑤ STRONG:

shows control and skill in this trait;
many strengths present

④ EFFECTIVE:

on balance, the strengths outweigh the
weaknesses; a small amount of
revision is needed

③ DEVELOPING:

strengths and need for revision are
about equal; about half-way home

② EMERGING:

need for revision outweighs strengths;
isolated moments hint at what the
writer has in mind

① NOT YET:

a bare beginning; writer not yet
showing any control



IDEAS AND CONTENT

(Development)

5 *This paper is clear and focused. It holds the reader's attention. Relevant anecdotes and details enrich the central theme.*

- A. The topic is **narrow** and **manageable**.
- B. **Relevant, telling, quality details** give the reader important information that goes **beyond the obvious** or predictable.
- C. Reasonably **accurate details** are present to support the main ideas.
- D. The writer seems to be writing from **knowledge** or **experience**; the ideas are **fresh** and **original**.
- E. The reader's questions are **anticipated and answered**.
- F. **Insight**—an understanding of life and a knack for picking out what is significant—is an indicator of high level performance, though not required.

3 *The writer is beginning to define the topic, even though development is still basic or general.*

- A. The **topic is fairly broad**; however, you can see where the writer is headed.
- B. **Support is attempted**, but doesn't go far enough yet in fleshing out the key issues or story line.
- C. **Ideas are reasonably clear**, though they may not be detailed, personalized, accurate, or expanded enough to show indepth understanding or a strong sense of purpose.
- D. The writer seems to be drawing on knowledge or experience, but **has difficulty going from general observations to specifics**.
- E. The reader is **left with questions**. More information is needed to "fill in the blanks."
- F. The **writer generally stays on the topic** but does not develop a clear theme. The writer has not yet focused the topic past the obvious.

1 *As yet, the paper has no clear sense of purpose or central theme. To extract meaning from the text, the reader must make inferences based on sketchy or missing details. The writing reflects more than one of these problems:*

- A. The writer is **still in search of a topic**, brainstorming, or has not yet decided what the main idea of the piece will be.
- B. Information is **limited** or **unclear** or the **length is not adequate** for development.
- C. The idea is a **simple restatement** of the topic or an **answer** to the question with little or no attention to detail.
- D. The writer has **not begun to define the topic** in a meaningful, personal way.
- E. **Everything seems as important as everything else**; the reader has a hard time sifting out what is important.
- F. The text may be **repetitious**, or may read like a collection of **disconnected, random thoughts** with no discernable point.



ORGANIZATION

5 *The organization enhances and showcases the central idea or theme. The order, structure, or presentation of information is compelling and moves the reader through the text.*

- A. An **inviting introduction** draws the reader in; a **satisfying conclusion** leaves the reader with a sense of closure and resolution.
- B. **Thoughtful transitions** clearly show how ideas connect.
- C. Details seem to fit where they're placed; **sequencing is logical and effective**.
- D. **Pacing is well controlled**; the writer knows when to slow down and elaborate, and when to pick up the pace and move on.
- E. The **title**, if desired, is **original** and captures the central theme of the piece.
- F. Organization **flows so smoothly** the reader hardly thinks about it; the choice of structure matches the **purpose and audience**.

3 *The organizational structure is strong enough to move the reader through the text without too much confusion.*

- A. The paper has a **recognizable introduction and conclusion**. The introduction may not create a strong sense of anticipation; the conclusion may not tie-up all loose ends.
- B. **Transitions often work well**; at other times, connections between ideas are fuzzy.
- C. **Sequencing** shows **some logic**, but not under control enough that it consistently supports the ideas. In fact, sometimes it is so predictable and rehearsed that the **structure takes attention away from the content**.
- D. **Pacing is fairly well controlled**, though the writer sometimes lunges ahead too quickly or spends too much time on details that do not matter.
- E. A **title (if desired) is present**, although it may be uninspired or an obvious restatement of the prompt or topic.
- F. The **organization sometimes supports the main point or storyline**; at other times, the reader feels an urge to slip in a transition or move things around.

1 *The writing lacks a clear sense of direction. Ideas, details, or events seem strung together in a loose or random fashion; there is no identifiable internal structure. The writing reflects more than one of these problems:*

- A. There is **no real lead** to set-up what follows, **no real conclusion** to wrap things up.
- B. Connections between ideas are **confusing** or not even present.
- C. **Sequencing needs** lots and lots of **work**.
- D. **Pacing feels awkward**; the writer slows to a crawl when the reader wants to get on with it, and vice versa.
- E. **No title is present** (if requested) or, if present, **does not match** well with the content.
- F. Problems with organization make it **hard for the reader to get a grip** on the main point or story line.



VOICE

5 *The writer speaks directly to the reader in a way that is individual, compelling and engaging. The writer crafts the writing with an awareness and respect for the audience and the purpose for writing.*

- A. The tone of the writing **adds interest** to the message and is **appropriate for the purpose and audience**.
- B. The reader feels a **strong interaction** with the writer, sensing the **person behind the words**.
- C. The writer **takes a risk** by revealing who he or she is consistently throughout the piece.
- D. **Expository or persuasive** writing reflects a **strong commitment** to the topic by showing **why** the **reader needs to know this** and why he or she should care.
- E. **Narrative** writing is **honest, personal, and engaging** and makes you **think about, and react to**, the author's ideas and point of view.

3 *The writer seems sincere but not fully engaged or involved. The result is pleasant or even personable, but not compelling.*

- A. The writer seems aware of an audience but discards personal insights in favor of **obvious generalities**.
- B. The writing communicates in an **earnest, pleasing, yet safe** manner.
- C. Only **one or two moments here or there** intrigue, delight, or move the reader. These places may **emerge strongly for a line or two, but quickly fade away**.
- D. **Expository or persuasive** writing **lacks consistent engagement** with the topic to build credibility.
- E. **Narrative** writing is **reasonably sincere**, but doesn't reflect unique or individual perspective on the topic.

1 *The writer seems indifferent, uninvolved, or distanced from the topic and/or the audience. As a result, the paper reflects more than one of the following problems:*

- A. The writer is **not concerned with the audience**. The writer's style is a **complete mismatch** for the intended reader or the writing is **so short** that little is accomplished beyond introducing the topic.
- B. The writer speaks in a kind of **monotone** that flattens all potential highs or lows of the message.
- C. The writing is **humdrum** and **"risk-free."**
- D. The writing is **lifeless or mechanical**; depending on the topic, it may be overly technical or jargonistic.
- E. The development of the topic is **so limited** that **no point of view is present**—zip, zero, zilch, nada.



WORD CHOICE

5 *Words convey the intended message in a precise, interesting, and natural way. The words are powerful and engaging.*

- A. Words are **specific** and **accurate**. It is easy to understand just what the writer means.
- B. **Striking words and phrases** often catch the reader's eye and linger in the reader's mind.
- C. Language and phrasing is **natural, effective, and appropriate** for the audience.
- D. **Lively verbs** add energy while **specific nouns** and **modifiers** add depth.
- E. Choices in language **enhance** the **meaning** and **clarify** understanding.
- F. **Precision** is obvious. The writer has taken care to put just the right word or phrase in just the right spot.

3 *The language is functional, even if it lacks much energy. It is easy to figure out the writer's meaning on a general level.*

- A. Words are **adequate and correct in a general sense**, and they support the meaning by not getting in the way.
- B. Familiar **words and phrases communicate** but rarely capture the reader's imagination.
- C. **Attempts at colorful language** show a willingness to stretch and grow but sometimes reach beyond the audience (thesaurus overload!).
- D. Despite a **few successes**, the writing is marked by **passive verbs, everyday nouns, and mundane modifiers**.
- E. The words and phrases are **functional** with only **one or two fine moments**.
- F. The words may be **refined in a couple of places**, but the language looks more like **the first thing that popped into the writer's mind**.

1 *The writer demonstrates a limited vocabulary or has not searched for words to convey specific meaning.*

- A. Words are so **nonspecific and distracting** that only a **very limited meaning** comes through.
- B. Problems with language **leave the reader wondering**. Many of the **words just don't work** in this piece.
- C. Audience has not been considered. **Language is used incorrectly** making the message secondary to the misfires with the words.
- D. **Limited vocabulary** and/or **misused parts of speech** seriously impair understanding.
- E. Words and phrases are so **unimaginative and lifeless** that they detract from the meaning.
- F. **Jargon or clichés** distract or mislead. **Redundancy** may distract the reader.



SENTENCE FLUENCY

5 *The writing has an easy flow, rhythm, and cadence. Sentences are well built, with strong and varied structure that invites expressive oral reading.*

- A. Sentences are constructed in a way that underscores and enhances the **meaning**.
- B. Sentences **vary in length as well as structure**. Fragments, if used, add style. Dialogue, if present, sounds natural.
- C. **Purposeful and varied sentence beginnings** add variety and energy.
- D. The use of **creative and appropriate connectives** between sentences and thoughts shows how each relates to, and builds upon, the one before it.
- E. The writing has **cadence**; the writer has thought about the sound of the words as well as the meaning. The first time you read it aloud is a breeze.

3 *The text hums along with a steady beat, but tends to be more pleasant or businesslike than musical, more mechanical than fluid.*

- A. Although sentences may not seem artfully crafted or musical, **they get the job done in a routine fashion**.
- B. Sentences are **usually constructed correctly**; they **hang together**; they are **sound**.
- C. **Sentence beginnings** are not ALL alike; **some variety is attempted**.
- D. The reader sometimes has to **hunt for clues** (e.g., connecting words and phrases like *however, therefore, naturally, after a while, on the other hand, to be specific, for example, next, first of all, later, but as it turned out, although*, etc.) that show how sentences interrelate.
- E. **Parts** of the text **invite expressive oral reading**; others may be stiff, awkward, choppy, or gangly.

1 *The reader has to practice quite a bit in order to give this paper a fair interpretive reading. The writing reflects more than one of the following problems:*

- A. Sentences are **choppy, incomplete, rambling or awkward**; they need work. **Phrasing does not sound natural**. The patterns may create a sing-song rhythm, or a chop-chop cadence that lulls the reader to sleep.
- B. There is little to **no “sentence sense”** present. Even if this piece was flawlessly edited, the sentences would not hang together.
- C. Many **sentences begin the same way**—and may follow the same patterns (e.g., *subject-verb-object*) in a monotonous pattern.
- D. **Endless connectives** (*and, and so, but then, because, and then*, etc.) or a **complete lack of connectives** create a massive jumble of language.
- E. The text **does not invite expressive oral reading**.



CONVENTIONS

5 *The writer demonstrates a good grasp of standard writing conventions (e.g., spelling, punctuation, capitalization, grammar, usage, paragraphing) and uses conventions effectively to enhance readability. Errors tend to be so few that just minor touch-ups would get this piece ready to publish.*

- A. **Spelling** is generally correct, even on more difficult words.
- B. The **punctuation** is accurate, even creative, and guides the reader through the text.
- C. A thorough understanding and consistent application of **capitalization** skills are present.
- D. **Grammar and usage are correct** and contribute to clarity and style.
- E. **Paragraphing tends to be sound** and reinforces the organizational structure.
- F. The writer **may manipulate conventions** for stylistic effect—and it works! The piece is very close to being **ready to publish**.

***GRADES 7 AND UP ONLY:** The writing is sufficiently complex to allow the writer to show skill in using a wide range of conventions. For writers at younger ages, the writing shows control over those conventions that are grade/age appropriate.*

3 *The writer shows reasonable control over a limited range of standard writing conventions. Conventions are sometimes handled well and enhance readability; at other times, errors are distracting and impair readability.*

- A. **Spelling** is usually correct or reasonably phonetic on common words, but more difficult words are problematic.
- B. **End punctuation** is usually correct; internal punctuation (*commas, apostrophes, semicolons, dashes, colons, parentheses*) is sometimes missing/wrong.
- C. **Most words are capitalized correctly**; control over more sophisticated capitalization skills may be spotty.
- D. **Problems with grammar or usage are not serious** enough to distort meaning but may not be correct or accurately applied all of the time.
- E. **Paragraphing is attempted** but may run together or begin in the wrong places.
- F. **Moderate editing** (a little of this, a little of that) would be required to polish the text for publication.

1 *Errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, usage, and grammar and/or paragraphing repeatedly distract the reader and make the text difficult to read. The writing reflects more than one of these problems:*

- A. **Spelling errors are frequent**, even on common words.
- B. **Punctuation** (including terminal punctuation) is often **missing or incorrect**.
- C. **Capitalization** is **random** and only the easiest rules show awareness of correct use.
- D. **Errors in grammar or usage are very noticeable**, frequent, and affect meaning.
- E. **Paragraphing is missing, irregular, or so frequent** (every sentence) that it has no relationship to the organizational structure of the text.
- F. The reader must **read once to decode**, then again for meaning. **Extensive editing** (virtually every line) would be required to polish the text for publication.

